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Youth, Aesthetics and Politics

Kirsten Drotner

In the following, I shall focus on more general preconditions of cultural production rather than on concrete expressions of ethnic culture. Hopefully, that perspective may be relevant as one framework of understanding the more specific issues of interracial relations that other speakers will address. Also, my discussion emphasises young people who as a social group are particularly sensitive to the comprehensive social and cultural relocations that we are witnessing just now. Naturally, what I have to say is shaped by a specific Scandinavian context: The relatively late, but rapid industrialization and urbanization of our countries, coupled with our long tradition of cultural pluralism.

Having said this, let me launch you on to the international scene of the mass media. Here, one might find a newspaper notice recently reporting that in East Berlin, all Punk-like squatters are now being outlawed from the city because of their »unaesthetic appearance« that detracts from the eternal beauty of the city - those of you who have experienced the grimness of the place know that this is, indeed, a serious accusation (*Politiken* 17.11.1988).

A few weeks later, the Swedish personnel executive at Scandinavian Airlines appeared on the Danish channel one expressing his concern for the future: Our educational systems, he said, should be restructured so as to nurture and strengthen the pupils' creative potentials. For it is the independently-minded and unconventional people that will ultimately secure the survival of our Scandinavian societies.

So, while the East Germans denounce any expression beyond the straight and narrow, such expressions are favoured by the Swedish executive. But before we turn to the all too evident distinctions between totalitarian and democratic states, let us look at the similarities of the two media stories.

In both cases, aesthetics and creativity are used as concepts covering other and more hardhitting reasons: In East Germany, squatters are clearly a *political* threat, while the SAS director has evident *economic* reasons

for wanting creative and empowered young people: We know very well that youth is becoming a scarce resource - before the year 2000 the Danish population of 15-18 year-olds will drop by almost a third, from 374.500 to 270.900 (*Statistisk årbog 1988* (Statistical Yearbook 1988): 45).

I mention these two stories as examples of the increasing tendency to express economic and political issues in cultural, even aesthetic, terms. This is a sign of the times. In periods of rapid social transformations such as our own, culture takes centre stage both in reality, in public debate and in research, as we know.

Cultural Paradigms and Youth

Much research is concerned with the new, with change and innovation. Not unnaturally then, contemporary cultural research often focuses upon the internationalization of cultural practices and values, the standardization of mass media output and the globalization of information that the new computer technologies facilitate.

One good example of such a research focus are the trendy postmodern theories. Jean Baudrillard, for example, contends that we experience a paradigmatic shift from the economic and political spheres to the aesthetic. And as points of reference and ultimate proofs the mass media are brought forward. With a certain pragmatic optimism, Baudrillard tries to celebrate the present state of affairs (Baudrillard 1987). Others, however, voice a more explicit cultural pessimism: Everything was better before, more genuine, harmonious even natural. This conclusion is particularly outspoken when children and young people become objects of critical attention: Just think of the recent outcry over video nasties that have haunted public debate in most European countries (Barker 1984, Sonesson 1989) and the tremendous popularity of for instance the American media critic Neil Postman's warnings that childhood is disappearing and that the constant media flow is just the most visible sign of a social future run by a regiment of experts (Postman 1986).

This fixation on newness not only makes public debate one-sided. It also makes research more limited in scope. For what has almost completely escaped serious attention is that contemporary cultural developments are not simply characterized by internationalization and standardization. If one shifts perspective from the rapid zapping between TV channels to the life lived around us, it becomes evident that contemporary cultural developments are equally characterized by diversification and

experimentation. Culture in the 1980s, is not just more of the same, it is also less of the same. Nowhere is this more obvious than in contemporary youth cultures.

The present decade has witnessed an unprecedented growth of cultural production, shaped by a variety of adolescents outside the confines of flamboyant subcultures and avant-garde counter-cultures. Undoubtedly influenced by these visible groups, many »ordinary« adolescents today experiment with media such as community radio, video and home computing, with musicals, modern dance and rock music to a degree that not even the garage bands of the Beatles, or indeed the Punk, waves could envisage. Youth clubs, public media centres and local activity houses may form institutional backdrops to these activities. But often they are part of informal and changing peer group relations.

Perhaps it was always a delusion shaped and nurtured by the academic left to distinguish sharply between distinct subcultures, politicized countercultures and then mainstream cultures. But certainly, the recent trends within youth cultures make clear-cut distinctions between trend-setting minorities and unimaginative majorities, between the political and cultural spheres, seem untenable as empirical demarcators and theoretical guidelines.

Seen from a Scandinavian perspective, the growth in ordinary youngsters' cultural production is marked by certain trends: (1) images, music and one's own body are of focal concern (video, rock music, skateboard); (2) middle-class adolescents form key members in the self-styled groups; (3) girls occupy a central position within many of these cultural spaces.

But what characterizes these cultural activities? What are their importance to the participants themselves? And what are the political implications of such cultural activities? In a three-year project carried out among 14-17-year-olds in a middle-class suburb of Copenhagen I tried to answer these questions. In the following, let me share some of the answers with you.

Culture as Process

As you may already have realized from my brief description, a key factor in these cultural productions is their close connection with leisure and hence their association to liberty and choice. The voluntary nature of the activities is a precondition of pleasure, and pleasure is the single most important element to the participants. For example, as part of my research

I followed a group of young video amateurs for a year, made participant observation during their production process, carried out in-depth interviews and finally made symbolic analyses of their various videos (Drotner, 1989). Not surprisingly, sex, love and violence made up chief ingredients of the video making process fuelling the participants' imaginations and figuring as structuring elements in the final products. Video making quite obviously allows negotiations of pertinent personal problems and group conflicts. It opens a safe space in which the participants can act out, test and negotiate contradictory and often threatening experiences. They create new meaning for themselves and among each other.

But this was not why the group made video. They came together to have fun, not to have their problems solved. The social and psychological negotiations, the creation of new meaning, are spin-offs, so to speak, of a specific process of creation that make conflicts acceptable by making them visible.

Video making is a good example of the cultural productions created by ordinary young people today. Apart from the driving forces of choice and pleasure, the activities are characterized by an intimate mixture of social and cultural experience: The participants do not separate what they do from who they do it with. The creative process is an intense experience and this experience is more important than the finished products. Thus, when »my« video group reached the editing stage, collective interest in the project dropped dramatically. Although everybody clearly wanted their friends to see the final video, only two or three technically inclined boys took it upon themselves to do the editing.

So, the process is important. It displays a unity of intellect and feeling, seriousness and laughter unities that are often difficult for adults to understand and accept since we are used to make much sharper divisions between these aspects in our own lives. In many respects, these cultural processes operate as forms of play and can be studied as such.

Play is an important, if often overlooked, part of contemporary youth cultures. Playfulness and fun are important for the participants since these aspects create an oppositional space to those defined by school, work and home obligations. Playfulness is also an important aspect to be noted by researchers: They tend to stress how the commercial youth cultures now reach ever younger age groups even eight- and nine-year-olds know who are their pop idols (e.g. Frønes, 1988). What researchers seem to forget is that these modern youth cultures allow a childish acting out and a collective experimentation that were often effectively sealed off by the more

regulated youth cultures of the past (the street cultures, the youth organizations).

Aesthetic Production

Choice, pleasure, playfulness: Such characteristics make many adolescent activities a specific form of cultural production, namely aesthetic production. We may follow Birte Bech Jørgensen's analysis of everyday life elsewhere in this book and define *everyday cultures* as social symbolizations of our immediate and often contradictory experiences. Such a definition clearly encompasses both our use of the increasingly international forms of culture made *for* us and the more diverse forms of culture made *by* us. It is also a definition open to grasp cultural continuities as well as changes. *Aesthetic production*, then, may be understood as those elements of our everyday cultures in which we create symbols, and hence meaning, by giving these symbols concrete form. We make the invisible visible, so to speak. According to the West German literary critic Christiaan Nibbrig, such an everyday aesthetics is a »realization *as* materialization (*ein Erkennen* als *Darstellen*). This materialization makes one realize hidden experiences that are now revealed to be unique precisely by their specific and concrete realization« (Nibbrig, 1978: 11). Thus, aesthetic production is not found only within drama, painting, writing or singing. It may also be expressed through popular forms such as fashion, makeup and rock music, or through interior decoration, painting motorbikes, even preparing a meal.

This extended concept of aesthetics may be termed *everyday aesthetics*.

Everyday aesthetics, it may be seen, is not limited to certain »artistic« areas of life, it is a specific way of perceiving the world and understanding ourselves. The group of adolescents, I followed, made tangible their various anxieties, aspirations and desires, not by sitting down describing and discussing them, but by making pictures and narratives fuelled by these emotions. What this process meant to them, I shall return to in a moment. But to better understand the personal implications, let us dwell a bit on the concept of aesthetics.

Although rooted in antiquity, the idea of aesthetics as we know it today, is shaped by modernity. During the 18th and 19th centuries, aesthetics is split in two directions: One is a philosophical discipline of reception, developed chiefly by Hegel and Kant, the other is a norm of artistic pro-

duction (in Britain, for example, Sir Joshua Reynolds and Matthew Arnold are key proponents). To our purpose, the important implications of this dichotomy are the distanciation of aesthetics from everyday experience and the concomitant specialization of aesthetics as a sphere for experts (and hence an area of education). Aesthetic reception becomes our distanced contemplation of the sublime, while æsthetics as a norm of production denotes the qualities of art created by a specially gifted minority. Aesthetics, then, is traditionally viewed as a harmonious realm of the mind opposed to political strife and personal struggle, and transcending the concrete details of mundane reality.

In opposition to the inherent social and sexual elitism of this aesthetic tradition, the concept of an everyday aesthetics has been advanced from two professional fields on the Continent. Aesthetic theory has been reinterpreted by the socalled Budapest School of philosophy (Heller and Fehér, 1986), and in West Germany cultural critics and art-school teachers have developed the term everyday aesthetics with a view to its practical, pedagogical uses (Ehmer, 1979; Hartwig, 1980). Despite some differences, certain characteristics stand out from these recent developments: (1) everyday aesthetics is regarded as a process encompassing both production and reception and engaged in by everybody; (2) it is lodged within everyday cultures and their contradictions; (3) aesthetic production is always a concrete process; (4) it does not transcend reality, nor does it merely reflect reality, but it may refract our experiences of ordinary reality in new ways.

The concept of everyday aesthetics, I think, allows more dynamic interpretations of culture. It reopens a theoretical space between the arts and social sciences. Crudely speaking, the arts have limited the concept of aesthetics to socalled high culture ignoring mass culture and self-styled cultures. When the social uses of aesthetics have been considered at all, they have been inferred from the interpretation of texts. Conversely, social scientists, when they do take seriously the concept of culture, ignore the aesthetic aspects of cultural production. At most, these aspects become symptoms or indications of social relations. Many of us, then, continue to make a false distinction between art and society - society being something »out there« that does not really, or should not ideally, influence aesthetic expressions. Bearing these considerations in mind, what then may aesthetic production imply to the people involved?

Implications

Aesthetic production is a concrete expression of creativity. As such it figures in the psychological literature on adolescence. Aesthetic production allows a negotiation of present problems and a projection of future possiblilites through an enjoyable regression to the safe patterns of childhood play. According to psychoanalysts, the aesthetic activities represent a possibility of working through and hence healing infantile fears and anxieties that are forcefully reactivated during adolescence (Kris 1952, Segal 1952).

Judged from the psychological perspective of individual development, aesthetic production clearly operates as a testing ground for an identity in the making. Crucially, it performs that function by a concrete process involving all our senses and sensibilities: Asthetic production is one of the few areas of experience transcending language and rational cognition, indeed depending upon that transition for its success. As was very evident in my video group, the aesthetic process does make use of existing symbols and conventional meanings: Advertising clichés and visual formulae were in great demand. But these are only raw materials in a signifying process that is selected by the actual participants and invested by their particular needs.

Aesthetic production then, is more than a psychological tool in fashioning an adult personality. It is a venue for the creation of new collective symbols and shared social experiences. Simply by being available as choices, rock music, computer games, even the remodelling of clothes or posters form obvious sites for the shaping of both individual and collective cultural resistance (Fornäs et al. 1988). Regarded as such, aesthetic production may be an example of what Birte Bech Jørgensen in this book calls »the powers of everyday life«.

The Growth in Aesthetic Production

Choice, play, non-verbal expressions. These form some of the clues to understanding the unprecedented growth of aesthetic production in contemporary youth cultures: They are the very aspects neglected in most other areas of life facing adolescents. Children and young people have always been watched over, told off and directed. This is called upbringing. But we have seen a gradual intensification of the contradictions between public and private interests inherent in that process: In many in-

dustrialized countries, the localized and differentiated parental upbringing is increasingly substituted by the public and more standardized socialization performed especially through education, but also through the media and a host of statutory and voluntary youth organizations. In addition, more and more young people are politically and socially marginalized outside the »regular« work force, while culturally and economically they are the focus of attention for the mass media (Baacke and Heitmeyer, 1985).

The majority of young people in western societies today experience an intense regulation of their time and space (and have often done so since early childhood), while at the same time many of them possess increased possibilities of resisting this regulation and of using new cultural venues such as videos, skateboards and rock music. The increased educational and vocational competition that an adverse economic and political climate enforce upon the young, make verbal skills and rational argumentation prerequisites of social survival. Young people, of course, know this very well, even if few of them thrive under such circumstances. Thus, it is no wonder that the young in ever-increasing numbers are attracted to leisure, and to precisely those leisure activities through which they may explore alternative experiences just by »being silly« or »having fun«. And the chosen areas for such experiences? Music, the body, images the very areas that most readily escape the strait jackets of verbal expression, rational argument and »being serious«. And the very areas that are traditionally denounced by well-intentioned teachers and employers as yielding any really useful knowledge.

A closer look at these »superfluous« areas reveal that their expressions are nurtured by two main moulds, namely gender and race. Undoubtedly, some of the deepest changes caused by modernity are the relocations of the relations between the sexes and between various ethnic groups. Youngsters in many small towns in Denmark long to have their own skateboard ramp or rep room (and we should remember that youth culture is not only an urban phenomenon even if cultural expressions are more discernible here). Their preferences are no simple reflection of black culture, nor are they merely imports rammed down juvenile throats by a scheming media mafia. Their preferences and activities are indications that the body and music cultures, developed for instance by the black and hispanic immigrants of the metropoles, find resonance among young people from entirely different backgrounds and with markedly different aims. Danish skateboarders, for example, are overwhelmingly pre-adolescent, white middle-class schoolboys, and their choice of activity is no

coincidence, no mere emulation of American life style. Within a Danish context, at least, skateboarding tends to operate as an internal symbol of peer-group adherence more than as a defiant demonstration of subcultural power and control vis a vis adult authorities.

Skateboarding and rollerskating are also good examples of the ways in which the pervasive gender transformations of modernity have begun to call into question the body itself as a female prerogative of formation. It is no longer unmanly for boys to display day-glo colours or tightfitting toreador pants, provided that this display is matched by the physical prowess involved in high jumping and competing about new feats on the ramps or in the streets. Spurred by the distinct youth subcultures since the rockers and the teddy boys of the 1950s, boys have certainly become more conscious of their bodies as arenas of personal grooming and sexual show-off. But, so far, this has not resulted in a more open attitude to homosexuality: Adolescent boys still have to prove their »proper« masculinity.

In many new forms of youth culture, then, race and gender form acknowledged or at least overt catalysts of expression and identity experimentation. Conversely, the contemporary use of more traditional youth cultures may be understood as covert or unacknowledged reactions to the same race and gender transformations. The rigid emphasis upon gender difference seen in the preppy and the rockabilly styles, for example, signify how race and gender may operate also as »hidden others« in a *chosen* cultural continuity. The changes appear only by their invisibility in these styles.

Everyday Aesthetics and Politics

The growth in aesthetic expression, I suggested, is a new trend in modern youth cultures. In obvious response to an increasing »reality pressure« laid down by dutiful parents, teachers and youth leaders, many young people today intensely seek areas of experience where they may have fun and be irresponsible, if only for a while. And many of them possess both the financial, social and emotional means that are necessary to make such a search successful. Their very success highlight the failure of dominant pedagogical practices and educational priorities with their continuing emphasis upon verbal cognition and their attitude of we-know-what-is-best-for-you.

At school, educational failure is not measured by an increase in the

drop-out rate (the bleak economic outlook and the scarcity of vocational positions make young people pragmatics). But teachers continuously complain about their pupils' lack of enthusiasm and genuine interest in the curriculum. In the areas of voluntary and statutory leisure provision, the failure of dominant practices is more evident. While sports, scouting and clubs operate as important leisure activities for more and more girls, the 1980s have seen a considerable decrease in organized leisure activities among boys. Thus, between 1981 and 1985 the number of non-affiliated boys from lower middle-class and middle-class homes more than doubled, from 10 to 20 per cent (Jørgensen et al. 1986: 168, 205).

Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that critical teachers and social workers committed to finding new ways of working with young people look around asking: What do young people themselves regard as meaningful activities? The making of murals, musicals and media programmes have been taken up as conscious alternatives to traditional pedagogical and social strategies and have been implemented in schools, youth clubs and on job-training schemes. And the alternative options work: The young participants immediately take to them, the aesthetic activities strengthen their self-worth and often create new social networks all of which make the young better equipped for the competition governing the volatile job market. And this is precisely the idea.

The pedagogical use of aesthetic production has become a tremendous success. So much so that what started as a radical alternative is now being refashioned as part of official educational and social policies. Thus, the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs recently launched a grand scheme involving 350 million Dkr over three years to facilitate cultural activities with a social aim (SUM: *Socialministeriets udviklingsmidler*, 1988-91). The scheme continues a trend already set in 1985 by the Ministry of Education which preceded a new law of adult education and popular education (*folkeoplysning*) by donating 100 million Dkr over three years to cultural projects strengthening the social networks of local communities. The Minister of Social Affairs, Aase Olesen, nicely sums up the rationale underlying these political innovations: »The best form of social politics is an active policy of culture«.

Naturally, it is a sign of a viable democracy that public policy makers try to learn from grass-root experiences. And the state-funded projects seem, indeed, to have been as successful as the local activities if one may judge from their reports (e.g. Balle-Petersen et al. 1989). Still, no one seems to ask if this success is a good thing. Let me therefore voice some of my own doubts concerning cultural work with young people.

When adolescents make video or play rock music in their leisure time, they do so to have fun, not to tackle any conflicts, as we saw. But once those activities become part of pedagogical or social programmes, cause and effect tend to be reversed: The starting point are social or pedagogical problems while culture is brought in to remedy these problems. The intrinsic value of aesthetic production - its apparent aimlessness and its association with pleasure - is lost. Thus, valuable and much-needed physical and mental breathing spaces run the risk of being coopted and functionalized as yet another arena of adult intervenion. But the power struggle inherent in any form of intervention is now hidden: Rather than telling young people what to do, we let them do what they want and then judge them by their results. Direct social control and pedagogical authority are replaced by mechanisms of regulation that are all the more effective because they are more subtle.

This cooptation, however, is no law of nature. In my view, aesthetic production may indeed be used in pedagogical contexts without losing its intrinsic qualities. As youth culture researchers we should be careful not to set up false distinctions between »authentic« and »expressive« leisure cultures and »derivative« and »repressive« organizational cultures: Aesthetic activities are not useless simply because they take place at school or on a job-training programme. But the risk is, indeed, greater. This makes the role of the teachers an issue of vital importance.

So far, the teachers or the social workers participating in the aesthetic projects have been as committed as the youngsters themselves (or even more so): Adults and adolescents have shared a mutual learning process that took anything from a few months to a year and from which both parties benefitted. This situation creates a unique pedagogical environment that is not readily copied in the public-school system suffering from overworked staffs and undernourished budgets.

With more money and less pressure, aesthetic production might work also with the blueprint of official policies. But time and money are not enough. The adults involved must also know their own strengths and weaknesses, including their more discrete strategies of wielding power. For aesthetic processes that work as real eye openers to the participants are not induced by generalized methods of teaching, they require teachers with a specific attitude to life and a good measure of self-reflection and self-understanding. Such requirements could be met, for example, by more intensive training of existing teachers and social workers.

I find few indications, however, that such lofty ideals are met in most of today's schools and youth clubs. Chances are that the official recog-

nition of aesthetic production will further deepen the social boundaries already in existence within youth cultures: Between the haves and the have nots, between middle-class adolescents investing, with Bourdieu, their cultural capital in a plethora of aesthetic activities made available by both statutory and voluntary agencies, and then their working-class peers to whom aesthetic production becomes yet another boring item to be endured at school or on their job-training scheme.

I do not know who will win the current struggle over aesthetics, the East German adherers flagging their overt authority by banning »deviant« aesthetics or the followers of the pseudo-democratic Swede functionalizing aesthetics and creativity in the name of economic modernization. What I do know is that the winner's chances are shaped by the cultural and social decisions we make today concerning young people.

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